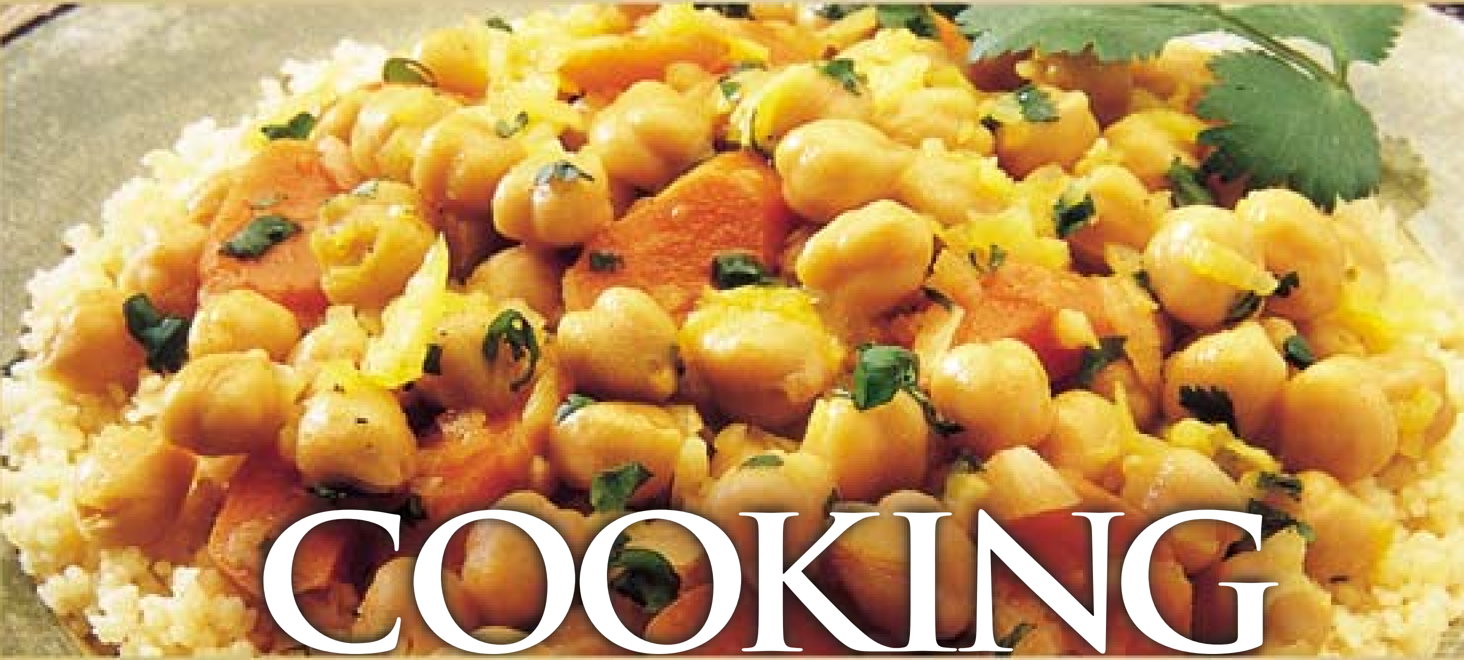
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COOKING THE NORTH AFRICAN WAY

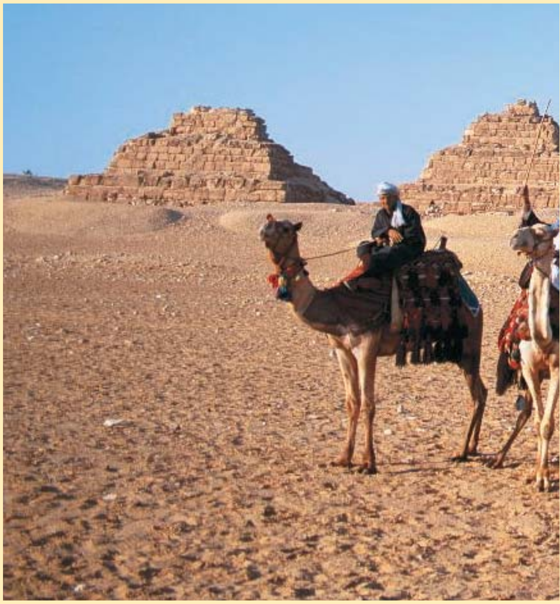
culturally authentic foods including low-fat and vegetarian recipes



MARY WINGET AND HABIB CHALBI

COOKING THE NORTH AFRICAN WAY

Disclaimer:
Some images in the original version of this book are not available for inclusion in the eBook.



This book is dedicated to my father, who has blossomed into quite the gourmet. —M.W.

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COOKING THE NORTH AFRICAN WAY

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Mary Winget and Habib Chalbi

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Contents











Introduction

North African cuisine abounds in rich, savory flavors and aromas, yet the basic ingredients are familiar. They include fish, poultry, eggplants, zucchini, bell peppers, carrots, lentils, chickpeas, beans, apples, peaches, lemons, limes, dates, and nuts. Lamb is the favorite meat in North Africa.

North African cooks transform these familiar foods with an array of flavorful herbs and spices. Common among them are cumin, cinnamon, ginger, saffron, coriander, turmeric, mint, cilantro, chili peppers, and garlic. Harissa, a paste made of garlic and chili peppers, and tahini, a paste made from crushed sesame seeds, are frequent additions to recipes.

The recipes in this cookbook represent a sampling of dishes from throughout North Africa. They range from tasty appetizers, called *mezze,* to fragrant stews, called *tagines.* With so many different recipes to choose from, you'll no doubt find several to your liking.

In this lamb stew, typical North African ingredients such as eggplants, apricots, dates, and cinnamon accent the flavor of the meat. (Recipe on pages 64–65.)



The Land and the People

North Africa encompasses the countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Other countries, including Western Sahara and Sudan, are sometimes also considered part of the region. The North African countries share a common history, language, and culture.

Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya are located in northwest Africa, in an area known as the Maghreb. Maghreb means "sunset" in Arabic. Islamic conquerors from the Arabian Peninsula who came to North Africa in the 600s gave the region this name because it lies to the west of other Arab nations. Egypt, farther to the east, is considered part of the Mashreq, or Arab east. Mashreq means "sunrise."

North Africa is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the west, the Mediterranean Sea to the north, and the Red Sea to the east. The landscape ranges from mountains and high plateaus to low, flat regions. The northernmost region, called the Tell, runs along the Mediterranean coast. In this fertile land, vineyards, olive groves, and wheat fields flourish. The dry, hot Sahara Desert stretches across the southern part of North Africa.

During most of the year, the North African climate is dry and hot, but some rain falls in winter and spring in the higher elevations. Temperatures in the Sahara Desert vary from more than 100°F at midday to below freezing at night. During the summer, hot, dusty winds called siroccos sweep northward from the Sahara, creating sandstorms that move across the Mediterranean to southern Europe.

The high, rugged Atlas Mountains in the northwestern corner of North Africa have snow-covered peaks reaching over 10,000 feet. At 13,665 feet, Jebel Toubkal is the highest mountain in North Africa. Egypt's highest peak, Gebel Katherina (8,652 feet), lies on the Sinai Peninsula, which is separated from the rest of the nation by the Gulf of Suez and the Suez Canal. Nearby Gebel Musa (Arabic for "Mountain of Moses") is thought to be Mount Sinai, where, according to the Bible's Old Testament, Moses received the Ten Commandments.

Although North Africa has thousands of miles of coastline, freshwater is a scarce commodity. The Medjerda River, running from the highlands of northern Algeria to the Mediterranean Sea, provides Tunisia and Algeria with its only year-round supply of water. Egypt depends on the Nile River and wells for its water. Many Egyptians who live in the south have never seen rain. The area along the banks

of the Nile River—which makes up only 4 percent of the land in Egypt—is suitable for farming. The main summer crops are cotton, rice, corn, and sorghum. Wheat, beans, Egyptian clover, and vegetables are winter crops.

Morocco's chief crops are wheat, barley, corn, sugar beets, citrus fruits, potatoes, tomatoes, olives, and beans. They are grown mainly in the coastal lowlands bordering the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. The rich farmland in this area gets plenty of water from many shallow rivers. In Tunisia date palms and olives are the most important crops. Algerian farmers primarily grow wheat and barley along the coastal plains, but other crops include dates, grapes, olives, potatoes, and citrus fruits. Only 5 percent of Libya is farmland, so the country imports much of its food. The crops grown there include tomatoes, wheat, barley, olives, potatoes, dates, and citrus fruits.

The two main ethnic groups in North Africa are the Arabs and the Berbers. Many Egyptians also trace their ancestry to the ancient Egyptians. Other North African ethnic groups include the Tuareg people of southern and western Libya and southern Algeria, the traditionally nomadic Tebu and Bedouin people, and the Nubians of southern Egypt.

The people of North Africa are linked by language and religion. The majority of people speak Arabic, even if it is not their first language. Almost everyone follows the Islamic religion. North Africa has more in common with the Middle East than with the rest of Africa because of the regions' shared religion, language, and culture.

About half the population of North Africa is rural. Most of these people live in the Nile Valley, the Mediterranean coastlands, and the Atlas Mountains, which are the most fertile regions. Still, almost two million people live in the Sahara Desert or on its edges. Nomadic people, for example, keep flocks of sheep or goats and move from patch to patch of vegetation and water. But more and more North Africans are moving to the large cities and towns to find work.

Wealthy North Africans live in modern houses or apartment

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buildings, but most urban residents live in crowded conditions in older neighborhoods. Rural people tend to live in small villages. Some farmers have their own plots of land, but most work for wealthy landowners.

The family is the most important part of Arab culture. Arranged marriages are common, but this practice is slowly changing. Men are usually the heads of households and work outside the home. Some urban, educated women also work outside the home. In Libya's Tuareg population, women hold the economic power. In Tuareg society, only women can own or inherit property.

The Food and Culture

North Africa is home to a mosaic of cultures. The region is close to both southwest Asia and southern Europe. Over the centuries, North Africa was frequently invaded and occupied by people from other countries. At different times, Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Turkish, and Arab peoples took over parts of the region. Each group brought different customs, religions, and foods, but the Arabs, who arrived in the 600s, had the greatest impact. In more modern times, starting in the 1800s, European nations began claiming much of the African continent as colonies.

North African cuisine reflects this diverse and layered history. Influences of the early Bedouin, Berber, and Arab peoples can be found in the cooking of the Maghreb. In Egypt some dishes date all the way back to the pharaohs. Couscous, made from semolina wheat, was a contribution of the nomadic Berbers. It has become a staple throughout North Africa and accompanies many dishes.

Thanks to the diversity of cultural influences, North African cooking includes a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, soups, stews, salads, and pastries. Religion also plays a role in North African eating habits. For example, Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol. Mint tea is the most common drink.

Historically, North Africa was a stopping point on the spice trade route between Europe and the Far East. As a result, North African cooks adopted many spices into their cuisine. The freshness and variety of spices are crucial in North African cooking.

People can buy freshly ground spices and fresh herbs in the souks, marketplaces lined with open-fronted stalls, typically found in the old quarters of cities. Sellers present great mounds of spices, creating a rainbow of colors and a delicious array of smells. The markets also abound with fresh fruits and vegetables, herbs, fish, fresh and dried fava beans and lentils, grains, and jars of olives and olive oil. The souk is a feast for the eyes and nose.

A typical North African breakfast, *fatour al-sabah*, consists of tea or

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coffee and a porridge made of either millet (a type of grain) or chickpea flour. Sometimes people eat flatbread or fresh fruit. In Egypt breakfast usually consists of tea and *ful*, or seasoned beans, the country's national dish.

Lunch, *al-ghada*, is the main meal of the day in North Africa. It typically begins with mezze, or appetizers. These range from a simple selection of nuts, olives, or vegetable wedges to a large array of tempting cooked delicacies. Perhaps a tagine—a tasty stew prepared in an earthenware pot of the same name—will follow, usually with

a heaping platter of couscous. Pastries or fresh fruits are served with mint tea for dessert. Dinner, *al-acha,* might be several appetizers, a hearty soup, or a single meat or fish dish.

Hospitality is a cherished tradition in North Africa. When preparing a meal for guests, people take great pains to offer a lavish display of dishes and make sure everyone is enjoying the meal.

Although Western-style tables and chairs are creeping into the culture, meals are traditionally served on large trays resting on low, round, wooden stools. The trays are made of copper, brass, or silver decorated with ornate patterns. People sit on cushions surrounding the tray. Although knives and forks are increasingly being used, many people eat with their fingers in the traditional manner. To do so properly is a delicate, refined art.

The meal begins with a young member of the family pouring warm water over the guests' hands into a decorative basin. When hands are dry, a few drops of scented water are sprinkled on them. Only the thumb and first two fingers of the right hand are used for eating from the communal dish on the tray.

The meal begins and ends with prayer. The host asks for Allah's (God's) blessing by saying *Bismillah!* ("In the name of God") before the meal. At the end of the meal, guests offer thanks by saying *Hamdullah* ("Thanks be to God").

Holidays and Festivals

Although each North African country has its own national holidays, the countries all share the same Islamic religious holidays, when family and friends come together to celebrate. Food always plays a central role in the festivities. Guests are welcome and are offered food and drink. To refuse is unthinkable.

Muslims use a lunar calendar, in which each month starts with the new moon. The Islamic lunar calendar is about 11 days shorter than the 365-day Western calendar. Every year, each Islamic month starts

11 days earlier than the year before, so the dates of Muslim holidays and festivals vary from one year to the next.

Most Muslim holidays and festivals mark important events in the life of Muhammad, the Arab prophet and founder of Islam. The Hegira celebrates Muhammad's escape from Mecca, where the people began to persecute him, to Medina (both in modern-day Saudi Arabia), where people welcomed him in the year 622. Hegira marks the Islamic New Year. Meelad-ul-Nabal celebrates the birth of the Prophet. The birthday of Muhammad's daughter, Fatimah, is observed as Women's Day.

In the city of Kairouan, Tunisia, celebrating Muhammad's birthday takes on special importance. Tradition holds that if Tunisian Muslims visit this city seven times, they can fulfill their religious obligation of pilgrimage. Pilgrims come from far away to observe the joyous occasion, called Mouled or Moulid an-Nabi in Tunisia. Brightly lit souks are open night and day, and the city is decorated with carpets and garlands. Mouled is also a time of feasting. Almost everyone eats *assida,* a sweet pudding, the morning of Mouled to mark the beginning of the festivities. *Makroudh,* small cakes stuffed with dates and soaked in honey, are another favorite treat.

Laylat-ul-Isra commemorates the night the angel Jibril (Gabriel) took the prophet Muhammad to heaven. According to Muslim beliefs, Muhammad toured the seven heavens and decided with God how many times a day—five—Muslims should pray, or recite *salah*.

The holy month of Ramadan is the most important holiday for Muslims. Ramadan commemorates Allah giving the Quran (the holy book of Islam) to Muhammad. This holiday is observed with fasting and prayer. Most Muslims do not eat or drink from sunrise to sunset. A light breakfast is eaten before dawn. During the day, devout Muslims visit mosques (places of worship) to pray and attend services. After sunset family and friends gather for another meal, such as *harira*, a Moroccan soup made from lamb, vegetables, chickpeas, and grains.

The feast of Eid al-Fitr ends the Ramadan fast. This celebration

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usually begins with special prayers at a mosque. The day gives everyone an opportunity to rejoice and to reflect on the past month. People dress up, often in new clothes. Many people exchange gifts, and children receive candy and money. Families and friends get together to enjoy special foods. Each family has its own favorite dishes.

Another important Muslim holiday is Eid al-Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice. This holiday falls during the hajj, the annual pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Muslims must try to make the trip at least once during their lifetime if they are physically able. Eid al-Adha celebrates the journey of the pilgrims. It also celebrates a story in the Quran in which Abraham is

willing to sacrifice his son for Allah but is stopped and rewarded for his faith.

To commemorate this story, Muslim families traditionally roast a lamb, sharing the meat with friends, neighbors, and the poor. Those who cannot afford such an extravagant feast might eat a stew, such as a chicken tagine. Like Eid al-Fitr, this holiday usually lasts for a few days and includes visits to mosques, family gatherings, and perhaps gifts and toys.

Local festivals and celebrations in North Africa are known as *moussems*. People may dance, sing, eat, and pray together, celebrating a local crop, market, or holy person. For example, in Morocco the Almond Blossom Festival takes place during the second week in February. Since the blossoms do not last long, their appearance is cause to celebrate.

Perhaps one of the most interesting festivals in Morocco is Imilchil Moussem, the Festival of Fiancés. Imilchil is a small village high in the Atlas Mountains. Traditionally, the young men and women of the area get married on the day of the moussem. In ancient times, a holy man used to bless the newly married couples, and, according to legend, they lived happily ever after. Thousands of people from the mountains gather under tents for three days of dancing and celebration.

People who live in the Algerian oasis (a fertile area in a desert) of Taghit celebrate the harvest of dates at the end of October. Other Algerian towns celebrate the cherry and tomato harvests.

All the North African countries have their own Independence Day and other national holidays. In Tunisia, for example, Independence Day takes place on March 20. In Algeria it occurs on July 5. Libyans celebrate Evacuation Day on June 11, marking the day in 1970 when British troops left the country, where they had occupied military bases since World War II (1939–1945).

Whether holidays and festivals are national or regional, religious or patriotic, the people of North Africa celebrate them with delicious foods. You too can try these delectable treats. Enjoy!



Before You Begin

Cooking any dish, plain or fancy, is easier and more fun if you are familiar with its ingredients. North African cooking makes use of some ingredients that you may not know. Sometimes special cookware is also used, although the recipes in this book can easily be prepared with ordinary utensils and pans.

The most important thing you need to know before you start is how to be a careful cook. On the following page, you'll find a few rules that will make your cooking experience safe, fun, and easy. Next, take a look at the "dictionary" of cooking utensils, terms, and special ingredients. You may also want to read the tips on preparing healthy, low-fat meals.

Once you've picked out a recipe to try, read through it from beginning to end. Then you are ready to shop for ingredients and to organize the cookware you will need. When you have assembled everything, you're ready to begin cooking.

Smart cooks will be attentive or ask for help when making this Algerian eggplant salad, which requires using a hot oven and heating oil on the stove. (Recipe on page 42.)

The Careful Cook

Whenever you cook, there are certain safety rules you must always keep in mind. Even experienced cooks follow these rules when they are in the kitchen.

- Always wash your hands before handling food. Thoroughly wash all raw vegetables and fruits to remove dirt, chemicals, and insecticides. Wash uncooked poultry, fish, and meat under cold water.
- Use a cutting board when cutting up vegetables and fruits. Don't cut them up in your hand! And be sure to cut in a direction *away* from you and your fingers.
- Long hair or loose clothing can easily catch fire if brought near the burners of a stove. If you have long hair, tie it back before you start cooking.
- Turn all pot handles toward the back of the stove so that you will not catch your sleeves or jewelry on them. This is especially important when younger brothers and sisters are around. They could easily knock off a pot and get burned.
- Always use a pot holder to steady hot pots or to take pans out of the oven. Don't use a wet cloth on a hot pan because the steam it produces could burn you.
- Lift the lid of a steaming pot with the opening away from you so that you will not get burned.
- If you get burned, hold the burn under cold running water. Do not put grease or butter on it. Cold water helps to take the heat out, but grease or butter will only keep it in.
- If grease or cooking oil catches fire, throw baking soda or salt at the bottom of the flame to put it out. (Water will *not* put out a grease fire.) Call for help, and try to turn all the stove burners to "off."

Cooking Utensils

colander—A bowl-shaped dish with holes in it that is used for washing or draining food

Dutch oven—A heavy pot with a tight-fitting lid

food processor—An electric appliance with a blade that revolves inside a container to chop, mix, or blend food

garlic press—A hand-held device used for crushing cloves of garlic

ladle—A deep-bowled, long-handled spoon used for serving soups and other liquids. To ladle something means to serve with a ladle.

slotted spoon—A spoon with small openings in the bowl, used to remove solid food from liquid

whisk—A wire utensil used for beating food by hand

Cooking Terms

boil—To heat a liquid over high heat until bubbles form and rise rapidly to the surface

brown—To cook food quickly in fat over high heat so that the surface turns an even brown

cube—To cut into cube-shaped pieces

garnish—To decorate a dish with small pieces of food, such as chopped parsley

mince—To chop food into very fine pieces

pinch—A very small amount, usually what you can pick up between your thumb and forefinger

preheat—To allow an oven to warm up to a certain temperature before putting food in it

sauté—To fry quickly over a high heat in oil or butter, stirring or turning the food to prevent burning

simmer—To cook over low heat in liquid kept just below its boiling point

steep—To soak in a liquid at a temperature under the boiling point so the essence can be extracted

Special Ingredients

allspice—The dried berry of the West Indian allspice tree, used whole or ground to give a pungent flavor to foods

capers—The small buds of a shrub that grows in the Mediterranean. Capers are pickled in vinegar and sold in jars.

caraway seed—The whole seeds of an herb of the parsley family, used to flavor foods

cardamom—A spice of the ginger family, used whole or ground, that has a rich aroma and gives food a sweet, cool taste

cayenne pepper—Dried red chilies (hot peppers) ground to a fine powder

chickpeas—A type of pea with a nutlike flavor. Chickpeas are also called garbanzo beans and are available dried or canned.

chilies—Hot peppers, used fresh or dried in cooking. Many different varieties of chilies are available.

cilantro—The leaves of coriander, a sharp-flavored herb used as a seasoning and as a garnish

cloves—The highly fragrant dried flower buds of a tropical tree, used whole or ground as a spice

coriander—An herb used ground as a flavoring or fresh as a garnish. Coriander seeds are also used as a flavoring. Fresh coriander is also known as cilantro.

couscous—Semolina wheat, traditionally rolled by hand into small grains or pellets

cumin—The seeds of an herb, usually ground, that give food a pungent, slightly hot flavor

feta cheese—A white, crumbly cheese made from sheep's or goat's milk

filo—A paper-thin dough used to make sweet pastries. The dough is also spelled *phyllo.*

garlic—An herb whose distinctive flavor is used in many dishes. Each head or bulb of garlic can be divided into several smaller sections called cloves. Before chopping a clove of garlic, remove its papery skin.

ginger—A spice prepared by drying and grinding the pungent, aromatic root of the ginger plant

harissa—A hot, spicy North African sauce made from cayenne, cumin, garlic, salt, and olive oil

lentils—A legume used in soups, salads, and stews

melokhia—A green, leafy vegetable, similar to spinach

olive oil—An oil made from pressed olives. It is used in cooking and for salad dressings. "Extra-virgin" or cold-pressed olive oil is made from the first pressing. It has a better flavor but is more expensive. Olive oil that has no designation is of lesser quality. Usually, a chemical has been added to olives that have been pressed many times, and, with heating more oil is extracted.

orange-flower water—A flavoring made from distilled orange blossoms. This can be purchased in Middle Eastern groceries.

paprika—A red, sweet-hot seasoning made from the dried, ground pods of the capsicum pepper plant

pita bread—Flat, round loaves of bread commonly eaten throughout North Africa and the Middle East. When the bread is baked, a pocket of air forms in its center.

rose water—A strong, sweet flavoring distilled from rose petals and used in many Middle Eastern dishes

semolina flour—Flour made from the gritty, grainlike parts of hard wheat

tahini—A paste of ground sesame seeds

turmeric—An aromatic spice derived from the turmeric plant

Healthy and Low-Fat Cooking Tips

For years nutrition experts have touted the health benefits of a Mediterranean diet, which is rich in vegetables and fruits, whole grains, nuts, and legumes. North Africans and other Mediterranean people get most of their protein from fish, beans, and chicken, rather than red meat. Meat is not the centerpiece of the meal but rather a flavor-enhancing addition to the vegetables and grains that form the main course.

Because so much North African cooking relies heavily on vegetables and legumes, many dishes are already low in fat. Recipes often call for olive oil rather than butter for browning, which naturally lowers the amount of saturated fat in the meal. Often you can reduce the amount of oil used in a recipe, further reducing fat.

Unlike many European and North American dishes that require cream and butter for sauces, many North African recipes depend on a rich blend of herbs and spices to produce a wonderful flavor and aroma. Cardamom, caraway, coriander, cumin, saffron, turmeric, fresh cilantro, and mint leaves, combined with fresh vegetables, lentils, dried beans, or couscous, can produce a savory and satisfying dish. In most recipes that call for lamb (usually used in place of beef), you can substitute poultry or fish or just keep the dish vegetarian.

Many North African desserts are based on honey, dates, raisins, almonds, and filo dough rather than butter, heavy cream, sugar, and chocolate. When recipes do call for richer, high-fat ingredients, you can substitute margarine for butter and low-fat milk for whole milk or cream. In desserts, however, be aware that these substitutions can change the flavor and consistency of the dish. Wedges of fresh fruit always make easy, healthy, refreshing desserts.

Most North African meals are healthy meals that taste great. As you become a more experienced cook, try experimenting with recipes and substitutions to find the methods that work best for you.

METRIC CONVERSIONS

Cooks in the United States measure both liquid and solid ingredients using standard containers based on the 8-ounce cup and the tablespoon. These measurements are based on volume, while the metric system of measurement is based on both weight (for solids) and volume (for liquids). To convert from U.S. fluid tablespoons, ounces, quarts, and so forth to metric liters is a straightforward conversion, using the chart below. However, since solids have different weights—one cup of rice does not weigh the same as one cup of grated cheese, for example—many cooks who use the metric system have kitchen scales to weigh different ingredients. The chart below will give you a good starting point for basic conversions to the metric system.

MASS (weight)

1 ounce (oz.)	=	28.0 grams (g)
8 ounces	=	227.0 grams
1 pound (lb.) or 16 ounces	=	0.45 kilograms (kg)
2.2 pounds	=	1.0 kilogram

LIQUID VOLUME

1 teaspoon (tsp.)	=	5.0 milliliters (ml)
1 tablespoon (tbsp.)	=	15.0 milliliters
1 fluid ounce (oz.)	=	30.0 milliliters
1 cup (c.)	=	240 milliliters
1 pint (pt.)	=	480 milliliters
1 quart (qt.)	=	0.95 liters (l)
1 gallon (gal.)	=	3.80 liters

LENGTH

¼ inch (in.)	=	0.6 centimeters (cm)
½ inch	=	1.25 centimeters
1 inch	=	2.5 centimeters

TEMPERATURE

212°F	=	100°C (boiling point of water)
225°F	=	110°C
250°F	=	120°C
275°F	=	135°C
300°F	=	150°C
325°F	=	160°C
350°F	=	180°C
375°F	=	190°C
400°F	=	200°C

(To convert temperature in Fahrenheit to Celsius, subtract 32 and multiply by .56)

PAN SIZES

8-inch cake pan	=	20 x 4-centimeter cake pan
9-inch cake pan	=	23 x 3.5-centimeter cake pan
11 x 7-inch baking pan	=	28 x 18-centimeter baking pan
13 x 9-inch baking pan	=	32.5 x 23-centimeter baking pan
9 x 5-inch loaf pan	=	23 x 13-centimeter loaf pan
2-quart casserole	=	2-liter casserole



A North African Table

A North African table is a pleasure for the eyes, the nose, and the mouth. Many dishes are colorful in themselves and have wonderfully rich aromas because of the blend of herbs and spices used in meal preparation. While daily family meals tend to be simple, holiday meals are special occasions. Depending on what a family can afford, food is often served on brass or silver trays and serving dishes or in beautiful pottery, often decorated with geometric designs.

Traditionally, food and drink are served on a cloth spread over a carpet or on a large tray resting on four low wooden legs. Guests sit on the floor or on low cushions, with the most important guest sitting next to the host. The traditional way of eating is to use the fingers of the right hand or pieces of flatbread used as scoops. These days it is more common in some countries to use plates and cutlery. Whether your table is set with ornate dishes or plain plates, tasting the various dishes is the best treat of all.

During lunch a group of Egyptian workers shares a variety of simple dishes.

A North African Menu

Below are two menus for North African meals—one for a light vegetarian lunch or dinner, the other for a more festive occasion. Use the shopping lists provided to gather the ingredients you will need to assemble the feast—and then enjoy.

LUNCH MENU

Falafel with pita and tahini sauce

Milk and pastry pudding

SHOPPING LIST:

Produce

1 large tomato
1 head lettuce
1 cucumber
1 head garlic

Dairy/Egg/Meat

1 stick butter
1 qt. milk
1 pt. heavy cream

Canned/Bottled/Boxed

1 10-oz. package falafel mix
1 package pita (flat) bread
lemon juice
tahini
1 package filo (phyllo) dough
mixed nuts
1 box raisins
olive oil

Miscellaneous

salt
sugar

FESTIVE MENU

Tunisian cucumber salad

Lamb stew with dates and apricots

Couscous

Fruit and nut drops

Mint tea

SHOPPING LIST:

Produce

3 large onions
2 cucumbers
2 tomatoes
1 apple
3 medium eggplants
2 packages or bunches fresh mint

Dairy/Egg/Meat

3 lb. boned leg of lamb

Canned/Bottled/Boxed

1 small jar whole, pitted black olives
1 small jar capers
20 oz. dried, pitted dates
12 oz. dried apricots
8 oz. blanched almonds
1 bottle orange flower or rose water
3½ oz. ground almonds
2 oz. slivered almonds
2 oz. pistachio nuts
¼ c. chopped walnuts
1 box couscous
olive oil

Miscellaneous

salt
pepper
cinnamon
allspice
sugar
powdered sugar
ground cardamom
loose green tea or mint tea
sesame seeds



Appetizers

Mezze are a way of life in North Africa. Appetizers can be served at the beginning of a meal or as a light meal in themselves. The more important an occasion is, the greater the variety of mezze is. Appetizers can be as simple as a variety of olives or nuts, sliced tomatoes, or wedges of cucumber. Or they may include a number of cooked and fresh salads and other dishes.

One of the most familiar North African appetizers for North American diners is hummus, a thick paste made of ground chickpeas, spices, and ground sesame seeds. It is often eaten with pita bread, the flatbread common in North Africa and the Middle East, and can be found at grocery stores and specialty markets.

The recipes in this chapter are just a sampling of the many mezze dishes enjoyed in North Africa. Mezze are limited only by your imagination and the ingredients at hand.

Falafel, which can be served with pita bread as an appetizer or a full meal, is made from ground chickpeas, garlic, onions, and spices. *(Recipe on page 33.)*

Brown Lentils and Rice/*Megadarra*

Megadarra *is a popular Egyptian mezze. It can be served warm or at room temperature, often with plain yogurt. Lentils are a basic food throughout North Africa. Browned onions also play a big role in North African cooking. These tasty caramelized onions are always a treat.*

3 tbsp. plus 1 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil

7 c. onions, vertically sliced *

4½ c. water

1¼ c. lentils, rinsed

1¼ c. long-grain rice

1 tsp. salt

¼ tsp. pepper

1. Heat 3 tbsp. of the oil in a large skillet over medium-low heat. Add onions. Cover and cook 15 minutes or until soft, stirring occasionally.

2. Uncover skillet and decrease heat to low. Cook 25 minutes, or until onions are golden brown, stirring occasionally. Keep warm.

3. While onions are cooking, bring 4½ c. water to boil in a large saucepan. Add lentils and cook 20 minutes, or until tender.

4. Stir in half of the caramelized onions, along with the uncooked rice, salt, and pepper. Cover and cook 25 minutes, or until lentils and rice are tender.

5. Spoon lentil mixture into a shallow dish and top with remaining onions. Drizzle 1 tbsp. olive oil over lentils.

Preparation time: 15 minutes
Cooking time: 1 hour
Makes 11 ½-cup servings

To cut an onion vertically, slice it in half from root to stem. Turn the cut side down and cut into slivers.

Falafel with Pita and Tahini Sauce/*Taamia*

Falafel is a popular item on the mezze table throughout North Africa, but it can also be a meal in itself when eaten in flatbread garnished with fresh tomatoes, lettuce, and cucumber and topped with tahini sauce. You can make falafel from scratch in the traditional way, by soaking chickpeas overnight, but the instant packaged versions are easy and tasty.

Tahini sauce:

1 c. tahini*

½ c. water

½ c. lemon juice

3 cloves garlic, minced

½ tsp. salt

Falafel:

1 10-oz. pkg. falafel mix

1¼ c. water

¾ c. olive oil

1. To prepare tahini sauce, blend ingredients thoroughly in a bowl with a wire whisk. Pour into a glass jar with a lid and place in the refrigerator while you prepare the falafel.
2. Pour falafel mix into a large bowl and add the water. Stir well.
3. Let mixture stand for 15 minutes to absorb water.
4. Form mixture into 1-inch balls.
5. Heat olive oil over medium-high heat in a large pan.
6. Fry falafel balls, 4 or 5 at a time, until brown and crisp, about 3 minutes.**
7. Remove balls with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towels.
8. Serve falafel with pita bread, lettuce, tomatoes, and cucumbers topped with tahini sauce.

Preparation time: 30 minutes
Cooking time: 3 to 5 minutes
Serves 4

**Tahini can be purchased in many grocery stores.*

***To avoid frying and reduce fat, the falafel can be baked on a baking sheet for 8 to 10 minutes in a 350°F oven. This method does alter the flavor and texture, however.*

Mashed Zucchini Salad/*Ajlouk Ruraa*

This Tunisian salad is served as a mezze with pita bread. The flavorings add zest to the simple flavor of the zucchini.

1¼ lb. zucchini (about 3 medium)

1 tbsp. fresh lemon juice

1 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil

½ tsp. salt

½ tsp. caraway seeds

½ tsp. ground coriander

½ tsp. harissa*

1 clove garlic, crushed

¼ c. feta cheese, crumbled

1. Cut zucchini into 1-inch-thick slices.
2. Place zucchini in a large saucepan and cover with water to 1 inch above zucchini. Bring to a boil and cook 20 minutes, or until zucchini is very tender. Drain in a colander.
3. Coarsely mash zucchini with a fork while it is still in the colander. Drain any excess liquid.
4. Combine lemon juice, olive oil, salt, caraway seeds, coriander, harissa, and garlic in a bowl and stir with a whisk.
5. Add zucchini and toss well.
6. Sprinkle with feta cheese and serve with pita bread.

Preparation time: 25 minutes
Cooking time: 20 minutes
Makes 8 ¼-cup servings

**Harissa is a spicy North African sauce made with cayenne and garlic. It is available premade in specialty markets. You can substitute a pinch of ground chili pepper in place of harissa. Begin with a small dash of this fiery flavoring—you can always add more.*





Soups and Salads

North African soups are made from vegetables, grains, peas, beans, or meats. Often several of these ingredients are combined. Even traditional soups, such as melokhia, have many variations. Soups made with legumes are common during months when fresh vegetables are scarce.

Soups are usually served at midday, but they can also accompany platters of mezze at the evening meal. During Ramadan soups are often served as a first course to a meal after a day of fasting.

Salads can accompany any North African meal. They are made from a wide variety of vegetables, legumes, and fruits. Dressings often combine olive oil, lemon juice, salt, and cayenne pepper. The garnish might consist of olives or fresh herbs, such as mint, cilantro, or parsley. Always choose fresh, crisp vegetables for a salad.

North African cooking uses crops that grow in the region as well as fish from the Mediterranean Sea. This Libyan fish soup calls for bass or red snapper. (Recipe on page 39.)

Egyptian Green Herb Soup/*Melokhia*

Melokhia is a popular soup that dates back to the time of the pyramids. Known in English as Spanish okra, melokhia is a green, leafy vegetable with a wonderful aroma. In the West, a dried or frozen variety is available in Middle Eastern specialty shops, but fresh spinach is a good substitute.

4 oz. dried melokhia or 2 lb. fresh spinach, finely chopped

6 to 8 c. chicken stock

4 cloves garlic

¼ tsp. salt

2 tbsp. melted butter or margarine

1 tsp. ground coriander

pinch of cayenne pepper

This soup is traditionally served with chicken and rice.

1. Crumble dried melokhia in a bowl and cover it with warm water. Let it sit for 30 minutes. If using fresh spinach, chop into fine pieces.
2. Bring chicken stock to a boil in a large saucepan or stockpot.
3. Add melokhia or chopped spinach and reduce heat to a simmer. Cook melokhia for 30 minutes. If using fresh spinach, cook for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.
4. Put garlic through a garlic press and mix with salt in a small bowl.
5. Heat butter or margarine in a small pan. When melted, add garlic and gently fry until garlic is browned.
6. Add coriander and cayenne pepper to garlic and stir well.
7. Add garlic mixture to broth and stir well. Heat to near boiling, then remove from heat and serve.*

Preparation time: 45 minutes
Cooking time: 30 minutes
Serves 4 to 6

Libyan Fish Soup/*Sharbat Hoat*

Many elements of North African cooking, such as the garlic and tomato in this soup, are the same as those used across the sea in Italy, France, and Spain. But the cumin in the soup is a Libyan touch.

1 tsp. olive oil

¼ onion, chopped

¼ tsp. cayenne pepper

4 cloves garlic, minced

6 c. fish bouillon*

1 tbsp. tomato paste

1 tsp. oregano

1 tsp. cumin

½ lb. fish fillets, such as bass or red snapper, cut into small pieces

3 lemons, cut in half

1. In a large, heavy pot, heat olive oil.
2. Sauté onion until soft and transparent, 5 to 10 minutes.
3. Add cayenne pepper and garlic and cook for 1 minute.
4. Add the fish bouillon, tomato paste, oregano, and cumin and bring to a boil.
5. Add fish, reduce heat, and simmer for 10 minutes until fish is tender.
6. Serve with lemon halves.

Preparation time: 15 minutes
Cooking time: 20 minutes
Serves 6

Fish bouillon, a soup base, is sold in many grocery stores as an instant powder or cube to which you add boiling water.



Moroccan Orange and Radish Salad/ *Salatat Fijl wa Latsheen*

In Morocco meals usually start with a salad, accompanied by bowls of olives and wedges of flatbread.

2 c. orange sections (about 2 large oranges)

1 c. sliced radishes

1 tbsp. minced cilantro

2 tbsp. fresh orange juice

1¼ tsp. orange-flower water (optional)

1 tsp. powdered sugar*

¼ tsp. salt

1. Combine all ingredients in a medium bowl. Cover and let stand for 30 minutes to blend the flavors.

2. Serve at room temperature.

Preparation time: 25 minutes
Standing time: 30 minutes
Serves 4

If the oranges are not sweet enough, add an extra teaspoon of powdered sugar.

Algerian Eggplant Salad/Batenjal M'Charmel

2 medium eggplants

2 cloves garlic, put through a garlic press

1 tsp. paprika

1 tsp. cayenne pepper

1 tsp. cumin

salt to taste

3 tbsp. plus 1 tbsp. olive oil

2 tsp. lemon juice

¼ c. parsley, finely chopped, for garnish

2 tomatoes, cut into wedges, for garnish

1. Preheat oven to 400°F.

2. Wash and dry eggplants. Place whole eggplants on a baking sheet and bake for about 45 minutes.

3. When eggplants are cool, peel them under cold running water. Cut the peeled eggplants into small chunks and place them in a colander to drain. Press gently to remove the bitter juices.

4. Mash the eggplants with the garlic, paprika, cayenne pepper, cumin, and salt.

5. Heat 3 tbsp. olive oil. Add eggplant mixture and fry, stirring constantly, until all the liquid is absorbed or evaporated, about 15 to 20 minutes.

6. Sprinkle lightly with 1 tbsp. olive oil and lemon juice. Garnish with parsley and tomato wedges. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Preparation time: 30 minutes
Cooking time: 65 minutes
Serves 6

Tunisian Cucumber Salad/*Salatat Khiyar*

Variations of cucumber salad are popular throughout North Africa. A simple, refreshing salad is often made with cucumbers, tomatoes or onions, and feta cheese, dressed with olive oil and lemon juice.

2 cucumbers, peeled

2 tomatoes, coarsely chopped

1 tart apple, cored and coarsely chopped

1 onion, peeled and thinly sliced

½ c. whole pitted black olives

¼ c. capers

12 fresh mint leaves

1 tsp. salt

¼ tsp. pepper

1. Slice off ends of cucumbers, then cut in half vertically. Cut halves vertically and remove seeds.

2. Cut cucumbers into coarse slices.

3. Combine all ingredients in a bowl and mix well. Chill for 15 to 30 minutes before serving.

Preparation time: 20 minutes
Chilling time: 30 minutes
Serves 4 to 6



Main Dishes

Main dishes in North Africa may be based on meat, fish, or poultry, or vegetables, legumes, and grains. Lamb is by far the most common meat in North Africa. In fact, when people say "meat," they usually mean lamb or mutton. Unlike cows, sheep travel well and can live on poor pasture. Chicken is another popular food. People who live near the Mediterranean coast eat fish often, but it is a rare and expensive treat inland. Beef is scarce throughout North Africa, and pork is forbidden by Muslim dietary law.

Many North Africans use meat sparingly, almost as a flavoring. For holidays, however, families may roast a whole lamb or sheep.

One of the region's most flavorful main dishes is the tagine, or stew. Tagines can be made with lamb, chicken, or fish and an aromatic blend of herbs and spices. They are frequently cooked in a traditional clay pot with a cone-shaped cover, which is also called a tagine. No matter what pot you use to slowly simmer your tagine, it provides a hearty, flavorful meal.

The traditional accompaniment to a tagine is couscous, which many people consider the heart of North African cooking. Couscous, very small grains or pellets made of rolled semolina wheat, is eaten several times a week in many homes. It is often served heaped on a platter, with a hollow in the middle filled with the stew. It's pleasing to the eye as well as the stomach.

Chicken tagine represents the best in North African cooking, featuring olives, couscous, and a delicious blend of herbs and spices. (Recipe on pages 48–49.)

Meatballs in Tomato Sauce with Eggs/ Tagine Kefta Mkawra

Tagines are popular stews throughout North Africa. This one from Morocco is made with lamb.

Meatballs:

1½ lb. ground lamb*

2 c. finely chopped onion

3 tbsp. finely chopped fresh parsley

1 tsp. cumin

1 tsp. ground cinnamon

¾ tsp. salt

½ tsp. ground ginger

¼ tsp. black pepper

cooking spray

1. Preheat oven to 400°F.

2. Combine all ingredients except the cooking spray in a medium bowl. Mix well.

3. Shape the mixture into 1-inch meatballs.

4. Spray a 9 × 13-inch baking pan with cooking spray. Arrange meatballs in pan and bake for 25 minutes. Drain meatballs in a colander before adding to sauce.

Ground beef can be used in place of ground lamb for the meatballs. Whichever meat is selected, you can reduce the fat content by using 90 percent lean.

Sauce:

3 tbsp. olive oil

3 c. chopped onion

4 c. chopped tomato (about 1½ lbs.)**

1 tsp. sugar

½ tsp. salt

2 garlic cloves, minced

1 jalapeño pepper, seeded and finely chopped***

3 tbsp. chopped parsley

3 tbsp. minced cilantro

3 large eggs

cilantro sprigs for garnish (optional)

1. Heat olive oil in a large, heavy Dutch oven.

2. Add onion and cook about 3 minutes, stirring occasionally.

3. Stir in tomato, sugar, salt, garlic, and jalapeño pepper and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat.

4. Reduce heat to medium and cook 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.

5. Stir in parsley and cilantro. Add meatballs.****

6. Gently break eggs over simmering liquid. Cover and cook 10 minutes, or until eggs are set.

7. Garnish with cilantro sprigs, if desired, and serve with warm bread.

Preparation time: 45 minutes
Cooking time: 60 minutes
Serves 6

***You can use 2 14½-oz. cans of diced tomatoes in place of fresh tomatoes to save time when making the sauce.*

****To prevent skin reactions, wear latex or vinyl gloves when seeding and chopping the jalapeño pepper. To seed the pepper, cut it in half lengthwise and use a spoon to scrape out the seeds.*

*****The meatballs and sauce can be prepared in advance. Reheat and add eggs just before serving.*

Chicken Tagine with Couscous/ Tagine Mseer Zaytoon

This classic Moroccan stew is simmered slowly to produce a rich broth with a subtle lemon flavor. It is served over couscous. Almost all the couscous sold in the United States is precooked. Even in Morocco and other North African countries, cooks used precooked couscous because it saves so much time.

Chicken tagine:

2 chicken breast halves (about 1½ lbs.), skinned*

2 chicken leg quarters (leg and thigh), skinned**

¼ tsp. salt

¼ tsp. black pepper

1 tsp. olive oil

1 c. chopped onion (about 1 large onion)

2 garlic cloves, minced

¾ c. chicken broth

¾ c. pitted whole green olives

1 tsp. ground cinnamon

½ tsp. ground ginger

1½ tsp. grated lemon rind

¼ c. fresh lemon juice

1 tbsp. minced cilantro

1 tbsp. minced parsley

1. Sprinkle chicken pieces with salt and pepper.
2. Heat olive oil in a large Dutch oven or stockpot over high heat.
3. Add chicken, cooking 3 minutes on each side, or until browned. Remove chicken.
4. Add onion and garlic to the pan and cook 30 seconds, stirring constantly.
5. Add chicken, chicken broth, olives, cinnamon, and ginger. Bring to a boil.
6. Cover, reduce heat, and simmer 45 minutes.
7. Meanwhile, prepare the couscous. Measure water into a medium saucepan. Add salt and couscous.
8. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer until water is absorbed.
9. Mix in olive oil and fluff the couscous with a fork to break up any lumps.

Couscous:

2 c. water

1 tsp. salt

2 c. couscous

3 tbsp. olive oil

10. While couscous is cooking, turn chicken over and cook uncovered for 15 minutes.

11. Remove chicken from pan with a slotted spoon and arrange on a serving plate around couscous.***

12. Add lemon rind, lemon juice, cilantro, and parsley to pan. Cook 30 seconds, stirring constantly.

13. Spoon sauce over chicken and couscous.

Preparation time: 20 minutes
Cooking time: 75 minutes
Serves 3 to 4

** Carefully remove skin from chicken with a sharp knife. Insert knife at edge of chicken piece between skin and meat, slit and remove skin. You can also purchase chicken with the skin already removed.*

*** After handling raw chicken or other poultry, always remember to thoroughly wash your hands, utensils, and preparation area with soapy hot water. Also, when checking chicken for doneness, it's a good idea to cut it open gently to make sure that the meat is white (not pink) all the way through.*

****Traditionally, 2 additional tablespoons of olive oil would be stirred into the couscous just before serving, but this oil is optional.*

Chickpea and Carrot Stew/*Tagine Bil Hummus*

This is a country-style stew that might be served when a family cannot afford lamb or poultry. Chickpeas are a staple of North Africa.

¼ c. olive oil

1 large onion, finely diced

3 garlic cloves, minced

12 fresh cilantro sprigs, minced

½ tsp. ground turmeric

¾ tsp. ground cinnamon

½ tsp. cayenne pepper

3 carrots, peeled and cut into diagonal slices, ¼-inch thick

2 15-oz. cans chickpeas, drained and liquid reserved

½ tsp. black pepper

1 tsp. salt

minced fresh cilantro for garnish

1. Heat the olive oil in a Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add onion and cook 6 to 8 minutes, stirring occasionally.

2. Add the garlic, cilantro, turmeric, cinnamon, cayenne pepper, carrots, and the reserved liquid from the chickpeas. Reduce heat to medium, cover, and cook 20 minutes, or until carrots are tender.

3. Add the chickpeas, pepper, and salt. Heat through.

4. Sprinkle with cilantro before serving over couscous (see page 49).

Preparation time: 25 minutes
Cooking time: 30 minutes
Serves 4



Baked Fish/*Samak fil-Furn*

Fish from the Mediterranean Sea can be prepared in many ways—marinated and grilled, baked, or fried. This recipe from Egypt is very simple to prepare.

2 lbs. white fish fillets (cod, flounder, or sole), cut into 6 pieces

1 tsp. salt

¼ tsp. pepper

¼ c. lemon juice

3 tbsp. olive oil

2 oranges, peeled and sliced

1. Preheat oven to 400°F.
2. Place fish in a baking dish. Sprinkle with salt and pepper.
3. In a small bowl, mix lemon juice with olive oil. Pour evenly over the fish.
4. Arrange orange slices over the fish.
5. Cover and bake for about 30 minutes, or until fish flakes easily with a fork. Serve with rice, couscous, or potatoes.

Preparation time: 15 minutes
Baking time: 30 minutes
Serves 6

Libyan Potatoes with Bzar/*Batatis bi Bzar*

New potatoes—small, tender, thin-skinned potatoes dug early in the growing season—are especially tasty when seasoned with the aromatic blend of spices known as bzar.

3 tbsp. plus 2 tbsp. olive oil

4 large new potatoes, peeled and cut into ½-inch cubes*

1½ c. water

1½ tsp. salt

1 large onion, chopped

½ tsp. cayenne pepper

½ tsp. turmeric

½ tsp. ground coriander

¼ tsp. cumin

pinch cloves

pinch cinnamon

pinch ground ginger

juice of 1 lemon

1 to 2 tbsp. water

1. Heat 3 tbsp. of olive oil in a large saucepan or Dutch oven. Add potatoes and sauté until they are golden brown, about 10 minutes.

2. Add water and salt. Bring to a boil.

3. Reduce heat, cover, and simmer for about 10 minutes, until potatoes are partially cooked but still firm. Drain potatoes in a colander.

4. Heat remaining 2 tbsp. olive oil in a large frying pan or Dutch oven and add onion. Sauté until onion is soft and transparent, about 10 minutes.

5. Add the cayenne pepper, turmeric, coriander, cumin, cloves, cinnamon, and ginger. Stir to coat the onion and cook for 1 minute to blend the flavors.

6. Add drained potatoes and toss until coated with onion and spices.

7. Mix lemon juice and water and sprinkle over potatoes.

8. Cover and simmer for 5 minutes, or until tender.

Preparation time: 25 minutes
Cooking time: 45 minutes
Serves 4

**You can use small red potatoes if you can't find new potatoes.*



Desserts

People in North Africa often eat fresh fruit for dessert rather than heavy cakes and pies. In the summer, platters of fragrant oranges, fresh melon, and grapes might be served. Winter treats include raisins, dried apricots, dates, and figs. Other popular desserts are puddings or custards, often made with rice or semolina. These dishes are tasty and inexpensive to prepare.

For holidays and special occasions, an array of pastries made of paper-thin dough stuffed with a nut filling and dripping with sweet syrup is served. In wealthier families, this type of pastry might be served more frequently, but lighter desserts are the norm. Desserts are served with a sweet mint tea. It is impolite for dinner guests to refuse dessert—no matter how stuffed they might be.

This Egyptian cake is made with coconut, nuts, semolina—a kind of coarsely ground wheat—and other ingredients. (Recipe on pages 58–59.)

Milk and Pastry Pudding/*Om Ali*

This creamy Egyptian dessert is very rich and is usually fried in butter. This version of the recipe is baked rather than fried and uses only a small amount of butter.

5 sheets filo dough (follow directions on package for use)

1½ tbsp. butter, melted

½ c. coarsely chopped mixed nuts, such as pistachios, almonds, hazelnuts, and walnuts

½ c. raisins

3½ c. milk

4 tbsp. sugar

1 c. heavy cream

To lower this dessert's fat content, skim milk can be used for whole milk, and margarine can be substituted for the butter, but the flavor will not be as rich.

1. Preheat oven to 475°F.

2. Brush one sheet of filo with some of the melted butter. Place filo sheet on a large baking sheet. Continue buttering filo, one sheet at a time, placing each buttered sheet on top of the others. Bake for 3 or 4 minutes, or until they are crisp and slightly golden. Remove from oven.

3. Lower heat to 350°F.

4. When cool, break the filo sheets into pieces and place in a baking dish. Sprinkle the nuts and raisins on top of the filo pieces.

5. In a medium saucepan, heat the milk.

6. Add the sugar and cream and heat and stir gently until mixture is warmed through.

7. Pour over filo and nut mixture and bake for 20 to 30 minutes until browned. Serve hot.

Preparation time: 25 minutes
Baking time: 25 to 35 minutes
Serves 6



Coconut and Semolina Cake/*Basboussa*

This is a traditional Egyptian dessert.

Semolina cake:

butter for greasing pan

1 c. sugar

1 c. coconut flakes

2 c. semolina

1 c. melted butter

1 c. milk

½ tbsp. plain yogurt

½ c. slivered almonds

½ c. chopped hazelnuts

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Coat a 9 × 13-inch baking pan with butter. Set aside.
2. Mix sugar, coconut, and semolina in a large bowl.
3. In a large saucepan, bring the butter and milk to a boil.
4. Remove from heat and add the semolina mixture to the milk and butter. Mix well.
5. Add the yogurt, almonds, and hazelnuts and mix well.
6. Pour mixture into prepared baking pan and bake for 30 to 40 minutes, until cake is golden yellow.

**To lower this dessert's fat content, skim milk can be used for whole milk, and margarine can be substituted for the butter, but the flavor will not be as rich.*

Sugar syrup:

1 c. water

1 c. sugar

2 tbsp. lemon juice

7. While cake is baking, prepare syrup. Place all ingredients in a small saucepan and bring to a boil.

8. Reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.

9. Remove from heat and cool.

10. Remove cake from oven and soak with the cooled sugar syrup.

Preparation time: 25 minutes
Cooking time: 60 minutes
Serves 8 to 10



Holiday and Festival Foods

In North Africa, holiday meals are social events involving friends and family. At many celebrations, tables are overflowing with special recipes of lamb, chicken, and seafood, olives, fresh fruit, freshly baked flatbread, and salads. Desserts such as stuffed dates, baklava, and *khtayef* (sweet pastries of nuts, honey, and sugar combined in a thin dough) top off the meal and are enjoyed with cups of sweet mint tea or thick coffee.

For most Arabs, meat is a luxury, and most everyday cooking uses little or no meat. Holidays, however, are an exception. On those days, a whole lamb or sheep may be roasted, and families and friends gather to share the bounty.

These bite-sized sugared treats can be made with almonds, apricots, or dates.
(Recipes on pages 68–69.)



Mint Tea/*Etzai or Atay*

Mint tea is the traditional mark of hospitality throughout North Africa. It is the first thing served to any guest. It is traditionally prepared in an ornate silver pot and poured from a great height into pretty decorated glasses. Guests show their appreciation by drinking as many as three glasses. Along with strong coffee, tea is the finale to any meal, especially on festive occasions.

3 c. water

1½ tbsp. green tea

3 tbsp. sugar

½ c. mint leaves, washed well

1. Bring water to a boil in a saucepan. Add tea and let steep for 3 minutes.
2. Put the sugar and mint into a teapot or a carafe.
3. Strain the tea into the pot or carafe and let it steep for 3 more minutes.
4. Mix well and serve very hot in small, heat-proof glasses.

Preparation time: 15 minutes
Makes 6 ½-cup servings

Lamb Stew with Dates and Apricots/*Sikbadj*

This is a traditional dish in many parts of North Africa. The stew combines two kinds of fruit with the meat.

3 lb. boned leg of lamb

3 tbsp. plus 2 tbsp. olive oil

2 large onions, coarsely chopped

2 tsp. cinnamon

1 tsp. allspice

salt and pepper to taste

3 medium eggplants, peeled and cubed

2 tbsp. salt

12 oz. dried dates

4 oz. dried apricots

8 oz. blanched almonds

2 tbsp. sesame seeds

1. Cut lamb into 1½-inch pieces.
2. Heat 3 tbsp. of the olive oil in a Dutch oven.
3. Add onions and meat and cook until browned evenly, about 15 to 20 minutes.
4. Add cinnamon, allspice, salt, and pepper.
5. Cover with water and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to simmer. Cover and cook for 1 hour.
6. On paper towels, sprinkle eggplant cubes with 2 tbsp. salt to drain juices. Let sit for 1 hour.
7. Rinse eggplant well in a colander and dry on paper towels.
8. Add eggplant to meat and add a bit of water if necessary. Simmer for 20 more minutes.
9. Add dates and apricots and simmer for 20 minutes.
10. In a small pan, brown almonds in remaining 2 tbsp. olive oil. Set aside.

11. In another small pan—without oil—toast sesame seeds until very lightly browned.

12. Ladle stew onto a large platter and sprinkle with almonds and sesame seeds. Serve with couscous. (See page 49.)

Preparation time: 30 minutes
Cooking time: 2 hours 10 minutes
Serves 6 to 8

***** Another popular, more robust version of this recipe is made by adding 1 15-oz. can chickpeas with the dates and apricots. Omit the almonds and sesame seeds.**

Harira with Lamb and Chicken

Harira is Moroccan soup eaten year-round but traditionally enjoyed after sunset during Ramadan.

4 tbsp. olive oil

1 lb. lamb, cut into cubes

1 small chicken, cut into 8 pieces

2 cloves garlic, put through a garlic press

2 medium onions, finely chopped

8-oz. canned, cooked chickpeas, drained

8 c. water

½ tsp. turmeric

½ tsp. ground ginger

½ tsp. coriander seeds

½ tsp. cinnamon

salt and pepper to taste

1 lb. ripe tomatoes (about 2), quartered

½ c. lentils, washed

2 tbsp. finely chopped parsley

¼ c. white rice, washed

2 eggs, beaten

juice of 1 lemon

1. Heat olive oil in a large, heavy frying pan. Lightly brown lamb cubes on all sides. Transfer them to a large kettle.
2. Brown the chicken pieces, garlic, and onions in the same frying pan and add to kettle with lamb.
3. Add chickpeas and water to kettle.
4. Stir in turmeric, ginger, coriander seeds, cinnamon, salt and pepper, tomatoes, and lentils.
5. Bring to a boil, cover, reduce heat, and simmer for 40 minutes.
6. Add parsley and rice and cook for 20 minutes.
7. Remove chicken pieces from the kettle. When cool, remove skin and bones. Return chicken to kettle.
8. Bring to a boil again, then reduce heat and simmer.
9. Whisk beaten eggs into soup and cook until eggs form strands. Stir in lemon juice.

Preparation time: 25 minutes
Cooking time: 90 minutes
Serves 6 to 8

***A vegetarian version of harira can be made by omitting the lamb and chicken, adding a 15-oz. can of fava beans, and reducing the amount of water by at least half.**



Fruit and Nut Drops/Halwat Fawakih

These colorful, delicately perfumed sweets from Algeria make an elegant dessert plate to end a special holiday meal. Medjool dates are large, delicious fruits that were once so prized that royalty hoarded them. Dried Medjool dates can be purchased in Middle Eastern groceries or the organic food section of supermarkets.

Almond drops:

3½ oz. ground almonds*

½ c. white sugar

2 to 4 tbsp. orange-flower or rose water

½ c. powdered sugar

12 slivered almonds

1. Mix ground almonds, sugar, and orange-flower or rose water in a small bowl.
2. Shape mixture into small balls the size of a large walnut.
3. Roll balls in a bowl of powdered sugar and stick one slivered almond on top of each.

****You can buy ground almonds or grind them yourself in a food processor.***

Apricot drops:

8 oz. dried apricots

2 tbsp. water

2 tbsp. plus ½ c. powdered sugar

12 pistachios

1. Blend apricots in a food processor until well chopped.
2. Place apricots in a small bowl. Add water and 2 tbsp. powdered sugar, 1 tbsp. at a time, and blend into a firm paste.
3. Shape into small balls.
4. Roll in remaining ½ c. powdered sugar and place a pistachio on top of each.

Date drops:

8 oz. pitted Medjool dates

1 tsp. cinnamon

½ tsp. ground cardamom

2 tbsp. water

¼ c. chopped walnuts

⅓ c. powdered sugar

1. Blend dates in a food processor until well chopped. Place in small bowl.
2. Add cinnamon, cardamom, and 1 tablespoon water at a time and blend to form a stiff paste.
3. Add walnuts and work in thoroughly with your hands.
4. Shape into small balls.
5. Roll in powdered sugar.

Preparation time: 20 minutes each
Serves 12

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About the Author

Mary Winget is an author and editor of nonfiction books for young people and adults. She has an M.A. in English from the University of Minnesota. Her hobbies include reading, gardening, cooking, politics, and theater. She lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota, with Sasha, her Siberian husky, and Muffy, her cat.

Habib Chalbi was born in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia. He moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1978, where he lives with his wife and children. Mr. Chalbi learned many of his recipes from his father, who was the chef for the Tunisian president. In Minneapolis he used his cooking skills in the kitchens of several of the city's finest restaurants. Most of all, Mr. Chalbi enjoys cooking for friends and family and shopping for new products and spices in the farmers' market and in ethnic grocery stores.

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